

# Clostridium difficile infection

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## What is Clostridium difficile?

Clostridium difficile (also known as C.difficile or C.diff ) is a germ that can be found in people's intestines (their 'digestive tract' or 'gut').

About 3per cent of adults and two thirds of babies carry this without any ill effects, unlike people who are infected with C. difficile.

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## How do you catch it?

A person may develop Clostridium difficile infection by ingesting bacteria following direct contact with a contaminated environment or person who has the infection.

In most healthy people Clostridium difficile will not be able to multiply in the gut and they will not develop an infection.

In some more vulnerable people, particularly those whose normal gut bacteria have been disrupted by antibiotic treatment, the Clostridium difficile may be able to multiply in the gut and go on to cause infection.

It is common to give antibiotics to people as a treatment for various illnesses. The antibiotics help to kill the bacteria causing their illness, but can also affect the natural balance of the good bacteria in the gut. This allows the Clostridium difficile bacteria to produce a toxin (poison) that then causes diarrhoea.

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## What are the symptoms?

Clostridium difficile infection mainly causes diarrhoea.

Abdominal pain, fever and, in some rare cases, vomiting can also be present. Clostridium difficile bacteria produce toxins, which can damage the inner lining of the lower gut.

There are different strains of Clostridium difficile and some can cause a more serious illness than others.

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## How is Clostridium difficile infection diagnosed?

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The diagnosis is made from a sample of diarrhoea that is sent to the laboratory. If someone is showing the symptoms of diarrhoea, precautions will be taken. These include moving the person to a single room (isolation) and strict hand hygiene using soap and water.

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## How does it spread?

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Infection is spread on the hands of healthcare workers, carers and people who have contact with infected patients and their surroundings.

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## Who is at risk?

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Various strains of Clostridium difficile affect all age groups. The risk increases:

- In people who are taking antibiotics
- If someone has had stomach and/or digestive tract surgery or manipulation
- When someone has a prolonged length of stay in hospital
- In people with medical conditions that can affect their immunity
- In older people.

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## How is Clostridium difficile treated?

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Clostridium difficile infection can be treated with specific antibiotics known to be effective, namely Metronidazole or Vancomycin, which should be given by mouth. The antibiotic thought to have caused the problem will be stopped and an alternative may be prescribed.

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## How can hospitals prevent the spreading of Clostridium difficile?

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Hospitals can prevent the spread of Clostridium difficile in the following ways:

- Making sure people receive antibiotics only when necessary
- Making sure the most suitable antibiotics are given when needed
- Patients with Clostridium difficile diarrhoea should be nursed in a single room to reduce the risk of spreading the infection
- Disposable aprons and gloves are worn by staff when caring for patients with Clostridium difficile diarrhoea
- Staff and visitors must wash their hands with soap and water after contact with patients
- Rigorous cleaning with hand-hot water and detergent containing chlorine is the most effective means of removing Clostridium difficile spores from the contaminated environment
- Patients should be careful to wash their hands with soap and water, especially before eating and after toilet use.

Alcohol hand rub is not effective against Clostridium difficile spores. Hand washing with soap and water is the most effective method to prevent the spread of infection.

In an outbreak, the Infection Prevention and Control Team initiate additional precautions in order to prevent the spread of infection.

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## What precautions should be followed by family and friends?

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Family and friends should wash their hands with soap and water before and after visiting someone in hospital. Those who provide direct patient care are advised to wear a disposable plastic apron and gloves. Visitors should not sit on the patient's bed. Please speak to the nursing staff for advice.

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## Do patients who develop Clostridium difficile infection have to stay at hospital longer?

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Patients who experience symptoms of diarrhoea will need to stay in hospital for at least 72 hours after their last bout of symptoms. If they are discharged to a care facility or if they receive any community nursing and care package. This is to prevent the spread of infection in the community.

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## What happens if I think I've developed Clostridium difficile infection at home?

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Contact your GP or your district nursing team if you have symptoms of diarrhoea. If a stool specimen confirms that you have developed Clostridium difficile infection, you will probably be prescribed some treatment.

The following precautions should be taken to prevent the spread of the infection:

- Hand washing with soap and water. This should be strictly followed by you, district nurses, carers or any family members in your household. Please ensure you have liquid soap and kitchen towels available for visiting healthcare staff to wash their hands.
- Any soiled clothing and bedding should be washed separately at the highest possible temperature.

Further information is available in our Advice for carers on laundering patients' soiled clothing leaflet, available on the Trust's website.

- The toilet (and commode) should be cleaned with domestic bleach. Once the symptoms of diarrhoea have settled you're less likely to be infectious.

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## Where can I find out more?

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Should you have any concerns you can ask the nursing staff on the ward or department. If you are at home please contact your nurse or GP. A useful website is [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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